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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 001520

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [HUMANR](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: THANH HOA PROTESTANTS REPORT BEATING BY POLICE

REF: A) JENSEN-STATE E-MAIL 6/20; MOELING-STATE E-MAIL 6/20

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. On June 20, Poloffs met with a Protestant individual from Thanh Hoa Province who provided a credible report that he and another Protestant had been beaten by police on June 18 after they were taken from their house church. Poloffs presented this information, including graphic photographs, to MFA officers who were visibly shaken by the report. The MFA pursued the inquiry after hours, presenting the report to senior MFA leaders and to the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). Reporting the same evening, our MFA interlocutor stated that though MPS is skeptical of the report, they are sending officers from Hanoi to Thanh Hoa to investigate. Our initial take is that this is a credible report, but we will try to verify information directly in Thanh Hoa as soon as possible. The quick response from the GVN is significant, but we have not yet seen a coordinated or official reaction. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On June 20, Poloff met with Nguyen Trung Ton, a member of the executive board of the United Gospel Church of Vietnam, aka "The Full Gospel Church" in Thieu Vien Commune, Thieu Hoa District, Thanh Hoa Province. Ton requested the meeting on June 19 by cell phone while Embassy team was on provincial travel. Ton had been visibly beaten with the left side of his face badly bruised and right eye swollen shut. He explained that Ton and another individual named Hac Ngoc Sy were beaten by commune level police on June 18 after they were taken from their house church meeting point.

Background

¶3. (SBU) Ton explained that his forty-person congregation formed in the 1990s and has been particularly active since 2000. Initially, they faced police harassment and "a number of individuals renounced their faiths under threat of force," however, in the last few years police attention had died down. This changed in early May of 2006. On May 14 a visiting pastor named Ho Duc Toan conducted services at the congregations meeting point, a house church owned by a woman named Le Thi Minh. Police raided this meeting and took Toan and Minh to the local People's Committee (PC) headquarters. The Thieu Vien Committee on Religious and Ethnic Affairs informed them that their services were illegal and advised the congregation to register legally under the GVN's new framework on religion. On May 23 or 24 (Ton wasn't sure which date) Toan and Minh submitted their application as instructed. However, the local PC refused to accept the application as "they had not received any instructions or guidance from higher authorities about allowing Protestant activities to continue," Ton said.

¶4. (SBU) Ton's church has been in contact with us before. In early June, Ton and Tran Van Ky, both members of the Thanh Hoa Full Gospel provincial management board, told ConGen Political officers that the FG congregation in Village 6, Thieu Van Commune, Thieu Hoa District,

Thanh Hoa province had been "continuously harassed by local authorities and police." On June 4, they reported that police dismissed the Sunday service, detained four people without written explanation, "beat them up" and confiscated four bicycles. The four followers were released that night, but were required to pay an administrative fine of VND 100,000 each. No reason for this fine was given.

15. (SBU) Ky said police asked followers individually to renounce their faith because it is "an American faith." Followers recorded a tape, in which local authorities and a chief of police named Hoe reportedly said "local rules prevail over the national legal framework."

16. (SBU) According to the Full Gospel members, in mid-May Ms. Le Thi Minh, in charge of this 40-member congregation, sent a letter to local authorities asking for assistance and instructions to operate in accordance with Decree 01 and the Ordinance on Religion. The church members reported that Full Gospel is not yet eligible for recognition, but Minh cited Decree 01's guidance that local authorities should give instructions to groups such as Full Gospel to operate while waiting for its headquarters to register at the national level. Ms. Minh did not receive a response.

17. (SBU) FG Pastor Ho Duc Tuan (based in the Southern province of Vung Tau) visited this congregation on May 14 and was "invited" to the commune police station for a work session, where authorities asked him to stop activities in Thanh Hoa until FG is recognized or face continued arrests, FG members reported.

Arrests on June 18

18. (SBU) According to Ton's report to Hanoi Poloff, under pressure from the commune police in Thanh Hoa, many members of the church stopped attending services on Sundays. On the morning of June 18, at 8:30 a.m., only four members of the church and Ms. Minh were in

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attendance. The congregants had not begun services yet and were "only chatting" when five members of the local police led by Deputy Police Chief Tran Kiem entered the church and demanded to know what was going on. Four of the members, including Ton and Sy, were asked to come to the local security station. Minh snapped two photos of the group as they were leaving her home (REF A, pictures 1 and 2).

19. (SBU) Ton stated that at the station, Ton, Sy and an unnamed third individual were questioned for ten hours (8:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.). A fourth individual was allowed to leave the station because he was from the commune. Ton stated that he and the others live in a neighboring commune but attend services in Thieu Vien. The questioning began "relatively cordially" but over time became more difficult. At noon, police officials began drinking alcohol with their lunch. The prisoners were not allowed to eat or drink and in the afternoon, on the instruction of the police chief (NFI), were placed in separate interrogation rooms. By 4:30, Ton stated that some of the officers in his interrogation room appeared to be drunk and also appeared "to be waiting for a signal to beat him." He said that by this point he was "feeling bored with the detailed questioning" and asked the officers in the room to come to the point. Kiem or the police chief asked Ton: "Do you plan to continue to come to this commune to attend services?" Ton replied: "Yes...it is allowed by law...if it weren't, I wouldn't come." The police chief then grabbed Ton by the shirt collar and his hair and slapped him three times. The rest of the officers in the room, including Kiem, joined in and beat Ton for ten minutes focusing on his left eye and torso. (Note: as they were all right-handed they would not have hit his right side as he faced them. End note.) After this, the group moved into the room next door where Sy was being interrogated and beat him as well, Ton said.

110. (SBU) Following the beatings, Ton and Sy were released (NFI about the third individual). They returned to Minh's home where she immediately photographed them (REF A, pictures 3-6). Ton presented the photos to Poloff and asked that we raise the event with the GVN. In the photos, Ton appears to have been more severely beaten than

Sy as his face and clothing are bloodied in the photographs. The bruises and damage Poloff saw on Ton's face June 20 was consistent with the photographs taken two days earlier. Ton said that he did not have any torso bruises.

MFA Demarche

11. (SBU) Immediately following the meeting with Ton, Poloffs requested a meeting with MFA officials to discuss the report and photographs. The officials were clearly shaken and stated that they were shocked by what they saw and heard. Poloffs emphasized that this case will receive considerable attention in the United States. This case is especially important, Poloffs stressed, as we have identified location, officials involved and witnesses/victims who want to come forward publicly with their allegations. The MFA officers said they appreciated hearing about this case from the Embassy before it hit the Internet. They were not prepared to provide an official response.

First GVN Reaction

12. (SBU) At 7:00 p.m. Poloff received a phone call from MFA America's Desk Section Chief Le Chi Dung. Dung stated he made the report to his superiors and to the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). MPS told MFA they have no reports of "incidents" from Thanh Hoa but recognize that they might not have heard about it. MPS also commented to MFA that the date stamps on the photos appear to be doctored. Dung reported that he told the MPS officer that Embassy staff had met with the victims personally and were eyewitnesses to the recent injuries. MPS agreed to investigate more thoroughly to "verify" the situation and will send officers to Thanh Hoa from Hanoi to look into the situation at the commune in question, Dung said.

Comment

13. (SBU) Our initial take is that this is a credible report, but we are working solely from the victim's account. We will try to verify information directly in Thanh Hoa as soon as possible. The quick response from the GVN is significant and demonstrates that MFA and MPS appreciate the potential impact of this case.

BOARDMAN